



war and peace in the ancient world

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From Achaemenid Imperial Order to Sasanian Diplomacy: War, Peace, and Reconciliation in Pre-Islamic Iran

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To Rüdiger Schmitt on the occasion of his 65th birthday with gratitude

Introduction

The history of the Near East was crucially shaped by the rule of the three great Iranian dynasties of the Achaemenids (ca. 550–330 BC), Parthians (ca. 250 BC–AD 224), and Sasanians (AD 224–651). The realm of Cyrus the Great and his successors is rightfully called the first world empire of antiquity, since, by incorporating the former empires, it temporarily covered the entire area between Thrace and Egypt in the west and Sogdia and the Indus valley in the east. By contrast, the Parthians and Sasanians shared their rule over the Near East with the Romans. For a long time, ancient historians have looked upon the history of these realms almost exclusively from a Greco-Roman point of view; this applies to the selection of the sources, to the determination of topics relevant to research (Wiesehöfer 2005b), and to the treatment of Iranian foreign policy that is usually considered only in the context of Greco-Roman eastern policy. Although, at first sight, a western perspective appears inevitable because of the abundance of Greek and Roman sources, it fails to do justice to the extant tradition as a whole and to take the priority of the indigenous sources into consideration; methodologically, both are indispensable if we want to achieve a fair understanding of foreign cultures. We should also remember that the relegation of Iran to the “outer fringes” or its designation as a “marginal civilization” (“Randkultur”) was due less to reasons of evidence than to the assignment of unequal cultural potential to the Greeks and Romans on the one side and the Iranians on the other, and to the distorting influence of ancient and modern stereotypes of the “Barbarian” or the “Oriental.” Although this chapter, due to the available evidence, will also primarily deal with the relations between Iran and its neighbors in the west, it will nevertheless try to adopt an Iranian perspective on the problem of peace and war in pre-Islamic times. I will begin, however, with some general remarks on the relationship between Iran and the Greco-Roman world (see *ibid.*).

With regard to foreign policy and cultural contacts, educated western readers still seem convinced today that the relations between Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and Iranians were of a primarily bellicose and unfriendly nature. Historically powerful key words like “Marathon,” “Issus,” “Carrhae,” “barbarians,” or “oriental despotism” have helped shape the perception that the ancient Iranians and their western neighbors were hardly ever able to engage in real communication and peaceful exchange. Yet a closer look at the history of their relations will teach us otherwise. That we owe Greek views of the “barbarian” (Achaemenid) neighbors to Greek authors is understandable; that relations, whether belligerent or peaceful, between Persians and Greeks are a central theme almost exclusively in Greek literary sources is informative; the fact, however, that, in addition, almost all Persian views of the Greeks are due to Greek versions of Persian views of the Greeks (“Persians on Greeks are really Greeks on Persians and therefore Greeks on Greeks”: Sancisi-Weerdenburg 2001: 340), is disturbing. Therefore, Greco-Persian relations in Achaemenid times disclose themselves to us only (1) through an exact analysis of the Greek testimonies, embedded in a history of ideas and mentalities and in a synchronic and a diachronic comparison, (2) through non-literary (especially epigraphic and archaeological) material found in the Persian Empire itself,¹ and (3) through the critical interpretation of historical myths and of literary *topoi* that, though influential, are only partly historical.²

For a long time, the military conflicts between Greek *poleis* (“city-states”) and the Persian Great King and, in their wake, an evolving contempt for barbarians in Athenian literature, rhetoric, and art that soon became a *topos* itself, were seen as predominant in relations between Athens, or even Greece, and Iran in classical times. However, as is well known, not all Greeks were enemies of the Great King at all times; on the contrary, many of them were his subjects, mercenaries, and servants. The Persians even became highly valued allies in Greek interstate conflicts and guarantors of Greek Common Peace settlements (Alonso, this vol.). Greek literature and art typically reflect multifaceted views of the Persians, not a uniform outlook. Furthermore, new excavations in Gordium and Dascylium in Asia Minor prove unreduced continuation of imports of fine Attic pottery after 480 BC (de Vries 1997; Tuna-Nörning 1998), and recent historical research has demonstrated that the border regions between the Delian League and the Persian Empire in Western Anatolia were zones of intensive cultural interaction (Balcer 1985; Miller 1997; Whitby 1998). All these findings warn us not to equate political and military antagonism with the absence of cultural exchange. Besides, in Achaemenid times cultural transfer took place not only in an easterly, but also in a westerly direction. The fact that military enemies might be “archetypal opponents” for the political identity of a community, but “models in some regard” for its cultural identity, can be exemplified by Athens in the third generation after Marathon (Hölscher 2000: 308, 313). At this time, when to rich Athenian youths the orient no longer appeared as a cultural opposite, but as an ideal and fascinating “other world,” we can observe a change of social ideals and patterns of behavior that used Persian models but, at the same time, adapted them to the Athenians’ own needs. Moreover, in myth (we need think only of Orpheus) and reality representatives of Greek culture, such as diplomats and artists, met “ready Oriental listeners” (Hölscher 2000: 310). Changes in life-style

and world-view were connected with the import of eastern products and the local imitation of Oriental luxury goods (Miller 1997). As far as Iranian contacts with the west are concerned, Iranian visits to Greek cult places (for instance Delos) are well attested, and they continued after the end of Achaemenid rule (Baslez 1986). Besides, in regions like Anatolia, due to the proximity of Iranians, Greeks, Lydians, Phrygians, and others, we notice simultaneous Iranian, Greek, and indigenous influences on culture, and there emerged new cultural phenomena in which we cannot always easily distinguish and attribute individual components. The favorable conditions created by Achaemenid rule for the spreading of scientific and philosophical ideas have once more been emphasized recently with regard to the history of astronomy and cosmology (Panaino 2001: 92–95). It was also in this period that Zoroaster and Iranian religious concepts entered the cultural horizon of Europe for the first time.³

Contempt and imitation of the barbarians, fear and admiration of a dangerous and decadent but also fascinating opposite and “other” world, military confrontation and transcultural exchange, acculturation and new creations – all these were almost contemporaneous forms of Greek mental as well as practical preoccupation with their powerful neighbors in the east. In contrast, in Persian royal ideology the Greeks (the “Ionians,” *Yaunā*, of the royal inscriptions) were worth mentioning only as subjects of the Great King. In practice, however, he welcomed the contributions of Greeks from outside his realm, from whose cultural stimulation as well as advice in political affairs he hoped to profit.

Heirs to the Achaemenids and Seleucids in Iran and Mesopotamia were the Parni, an originally semi-nomadic people who invaded the Iranian province of Parthia around 250 BC and conquered all of western Iran and Mesopotamia after the Seleucids’ defeat by Rome in 190 BC. Eventually, the Parni, calling themselves Parthians soon after their first successes, and their kings of the Arsacid clan became familiar with Greek culture and with various forms and processes of transculturation, first in Parthia and later in other parts of Iran and Mesopotamia. For centuries, they shared borders with the Seleucid and then the Roman empires in the west and for more than 100 years with the Greco-Bactrian empire in the east, and they ruled over a large number of Greek subjects or subjects affected by Greek culture. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Arsacid era was particularly marked by cultural exchange in various forms and by phenomena of syncretism. It might have been bad experiences with their Roman neighbors and their destabilizing effect on Arsacid rule,⁴ domestic necessities, and/or a new concept of safeguarding their power which, in the first century AD, induced Vologeses I and his successors to stress the Iranian foundations of Arsacid kingship and imperial rule. Compared with such “Iranianism,” which anticipates later Sasanian times, the Greco-Hellenistic foundations of royal self-legitimation, self-perception, and views of their realm faded in importance, although Greek cultural traditions in Mesopotamia and Iran did not disappear. It was, after all, the role of the Parthians as transmitters of goods and ideas between the Roman Empire and India, Central Asia, and China that opened up the east to Greek culture and the west to eastern cultures (Wiesehöfer 2001b).

On April 28, 224 AD the Parthian king Artabanus IV lost his life in a battle against his challenger Ardashir, the vassal king of Fars. This marked the end of the almost

500-year-old Arsacid reign over Iran. The new masters from the “house” of Sasan had begun their ascent as local dynasts of Istakhr near Persepolis and from 205/6 extended their domain at the expense of other “petty kings” of the south. In the following years they came into possession of all Parthian territories as well as north-eastern Arabia. So far, scholars have paid little attention to the history of relations between the Sasanian Empire and the Mediterranean world.⁵ Normally, they have limited themselves to an account of the military encounters between Iran and Rome or Byzantium and of the Romano-Byzantine views of Iran. Many of the older studies that deal with peaceful contacts between Romans/Byzantines and Sasanians subscribe to the conventional west-east perspective, overlook the variety of cultures and traditions on both sides of the Euphrates and the multifaceted processes of cultural interaction, and think of the reception and transformation of western cultural elements in Iran chiefly as “barbarization” (Hauser 2001). Only recently, regional studies (such as Fowden 1999 on the monastery of Saint Sergius) have begun to underline the multicultural character of the border regions, the extent of cross-border transcultural contacts, and the inadequacy of holistic cultural concepts based on ideas of ethnic isolation and purity. Other studies have demonstrated the importance and variety of official as well as unofficial friendly exchange between Romans and Sasanians in the fields of philosophy, medicine, religion, mythology, and magic as well as art and technical knowledge.⁶ And only recently has the role of Rome and Byzantium in the Iranian view of world history been uncovered (Wiesehöfer 2005a).

In view of the state of our sources, and because there is no Iranian historiographical tradition comparable to the Greco-Roman, it is impossible to deal with the topic of this volume in the context of a history of events. It makes more sense to illustrate its importance by way of three case studies, focusing, for the Achaemenids, on the royal ideology of a *pax Achaemenidica* (“Achaemenid Peace”) and Persian strategies of reconciliation in a regional or local context; for the Parthians on the Arsacids’ liking of Greek culture and their dealings with the “Greek” cities of their realm in times of peace and war; and for the Sasanians on the procedures of peace negotiations and the motif of the chivalrous single combat.

Pax Achaemenidica: Royal Ideology of Peace and Achaemenid Strategies of Reconciliation

Proclaims Darius, the king: May Auramazda bring me aid together with all the gods; and may Auramazda protect this country from the (enemy) army (*hainā*), from crop failure (*dušiyāra*) (and) from Falsehood (*drauga*)! Upon this country may not come an (enemy) army, nor crop failure nor Falsehood! This I pray as a favour of Auramazda together with all the gods; this favour may Auramazda grant me together with all the gods (*DPd* 12–24; trans. R. Schmitt).

The ideological traits of Achaemenid kingship, heralded empire-wide in images and inscriptions, can be summarized as follows: first, kingship is firmly rooted in Persia or, more precisely, in the region of Persis and the Aryan ethnic and cultural community,

and it requires descent from the family of Achaemenes.⁷ The Persians, at the same time, stand out among all peoples on account of their abilities and their special relationship to the ruler. Persian kingship differs from that of any neighbors and predecessors in that it exceeds them in power (“king of kings”), not least because an unprecedented number of “lands” or “peoples” acknowledges its rule. Second, Persian kingship is characterized by a special relationship between ruler and gods, although neither divine descent nor godlike qualities are attributed to the king. Auramazda “and the other gods that are” have bestowed the kingdom on Darius (or Xerxes); “by the favor of Auramazda” he has been elected and installed, and – successfully – rules the empire. As the god’s “representative” on earth, he is vested with a kind of royal charisma (**farnah*). Third, as he owes his kingship to the favor of Auramazda, the king is obliged to protect the god’s good creation. He is capable of doing so because the god has given him the ability to tell right from wrong and because he has special qualities which are conducive to the promotion of justice and the protection of order. Although an absolute monarch, he is capable of being impartial and self-controlled; he judges, rewards, and punishes not at his own discretion, but always on the basis of fairness; as a good horseman, warrior, and farmer he is able to ward off the dangers threatening his empire. This is why the violent death of a king (by murder or on the battlefield) endangers god-given imperial order no less than the disloyalty of the king’s subjects (*bandakā*) does. Order, not chaos, peace, not tension, good conduct of the subjects and royal generosity, not disloyalty and kingly misbehavior dominate the inscriptions and the imagery of the royal residences.

The Persian kings had no problems in adapting their behavior to the royal ideologies of foreign cultures. They were, on the contrary, eager to gain advantage from them (thus in his cylinder inscription from Babylon Cyrus shows himself to be the tool of Marduk, and Darius calls himself “king by the favor of Bel” in a copy of his record of deeds in the same place). In the context of his official and social functions both in the palace and as a traveling king, the ruler on the one hand emphasizes the *master-servant* relationship between himself and all his subjects (e.g. when distributing gifts or arranging banquets). On the other hand, and at the same time, he gives the impression of being accessible and concerned with the worries of his subjects.

The inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings take the loyalty of the subjects for granted, presenting it as the necessary consequence of divine instruction and royal efforts to guarantee justice, “truth,” and the well-being of all inhabitants of their realm. These efforts are desired by the gods, and it is Auramazda in particular who enables the king to fulfill his tasks.⁸ By contrast, the inscriptions threaten with sanctions the man who is not inclined to follow divine and royal law.⁹ Greek tradition and royal proclamations (cf. *DB*) know of merciless revenge and cruel punishment of rebels and insurgents, even if kings Cambyzes and Xerxes, presented as particularly cruel by Greek sources, must be acquitted of some of the crimes they purportedly committed and their acts hardly differed from those of their more popular fathers, Cyrus and Darius. Carrot and stick, guarantee of well-being (although within traditional relationships that were economically and socially unbalanced) and graveyard peace after the quelling of rebellions were the two sides of the *pax Achaemenidica* at all times.

Provincial elites imitated the royal life-style and adopted royal images and proclamations. The significance of this phenomenon might become clearer if we reconsidered it, for example, in the light of recent research on Augustan culture. Did this “semantic” and “pragmatic” system “of large scope” not also prevent the hatching of counter or alternative plans? Is it enough to explain its spreading to the private sphere only by joyful agreement of the recipients or could it partially be an expression of “non-committal political applause” or a rather opportunistic mentality? Could the ancient spectators and listeners not have grown weary of the constant repetition and ubiquity of royal imagery and epigraphic set phrases, even if we today might like their emphasis on peace and order and their renouncement of images of war and strife?¹⁰ Moreover, political reality was not as peaceful as proclaimed.

Up to now, the positive image the Persian kings created of themselves and their policy has remained quite powerful – if we leave aside the equally imaginative Greco-occidental representation of the Persian Wars with the Greeks. Emphasis is often placed on the “tolerance” of the Achaemenids which, especially in comparison with their Assyrian forerunners, appears as the exact opposite of the strictness, severity, or even brutality of Sargon, Sanherib or Assurbanipal. Such statements are based particularly on the great difference in tenor between the Assyrian and Achaemenid royal proclamations in both their epigraphic and pictorial forms. But three points are easily overlooked. First, when the Achaemenids established, extended, and secured their rule, they must have had in mind the Assyrian example of the foundation, maintenance, and downfall of an empire. Second, Cyrus and his successors emulated their Assyrian forerunners in words (e.g. in Cyrus’s famous cylinder inscription from Babylon in which Assurbanipal is mentioned), in pictures (for instance, in the sculptural art of the palaces, which shows Assyrian influence),¹¹ and in deeds (deportations, quelling of rebellions; van der Spek 1983; Bedford in press); they also left no doubt about the fact that their empire had been established by means of war (Briant 1999). Third, Achaemenid minor (e.g. glyptic) art knows martial subjects very well, and the Achaemenid images of imperial peace are affixed to the external façades of the palaces, whereas the Assyrian images of conquest and submission are found inside the palace rooms (Kuhrt 2001: 168). In addition, much else suggests that the Persians had learned their lesson from Assyrian ideology and practice and were probably also imitating the Neo-Babylonians.¹² The result was an imperial ideology that particularly stressed the reciprocity of royal care and loyalty of the subjects. The Persians also showed greater flexibility in the administration of their empire (omitting universal provincialization and promoting local autonomy); they did not impose hierarchization on the divine sphere (the local divinities were not subordinated to Auramazda), and they did not engage in mass deportations on an Assyrian or Roman scale as a means of pacification.¹³

The well-considered and successful Achaemenid policy of reconciliation and peace-keeping can be illustrated with two historical case studies; these, however, are not meant to give the impression that there were no irrational elements in Persian governmental practice.¹⁴ A Milesian inscription indicates that around 390 BC the cities of the Ionian Federation settled a border dispute between two members, Miletus and Myus, under the supervision of the satrap Struses (Struthas). The Federation’s Court

of Justice (perhaps called up by the satrap after an appeal of the cities to the king) carried out an investigation which, however, did not lead to a verdict because the Myusians gave up beforehand. The satrap was informed about the fact and confirmed that the land was to belong to the Milesians. In other words, a local instance usually made a decision after independent proceedings, and the satrap ratified, that is, recognized it and made a note of it and its political and fiscal effects in the provincial archives. We know of such decisions and regulations of local or regional administrative bodies in the fourth century BC that were sanctioned by the Persian governor because of their political and fiscal relevance for the satrapy.

The second example comes from a completely different cultural area within the empire. At the end of the fifth century BC, a conflict erupted at Elephantine, on the southern border of Egypt, between the Jewish worshippers of Yahweh and the Egyptian priests of Khnum, in the course of which the Jewish sanctuary was destroyed. The official Persian decision, which was made after repeated requests of the Jewish military settlers, is characteristic of Persian religious policy: the administration agreed to the reconstruction of the temple or altar house because the Jews could refer to privileges dating to the time of Cambyses. The Persians did not interfere with the religious and ritual issues; instead, these were decided by the authorities in Jerusalem who made arrangements for a further offering of food and incense, but no longer for burnt offerings which before had probably included rams, the sacred animals of Khnum. Even in the religious and ritual sphere, therefore, we observe the interaction of local autonomy and central control. The latter could even authorize the destruction of a sacred place like the temple of Apollo at Didyma that had been involved in the Ionian Rebellion and was therefore regarded by the Persian king as a place of demons.

Even if the extent of the subjects' acceptance or refusal of the royal Persian "order of peace" cannot really be determined, the Achaemenid Empire came to an end mostly because of the tactical skills of a military opponent, not because of a lack of internal cohesion or administrative or economic crises. Such cohesion had been the result of consistent royal actions for the well-being of the subjects and the successful combination of an amazing degree of autonomy granted to the subjects (structural "tolerance") and strict and, when necessary, severe supervision by the central authorities. Its conqueror, Alexander, regarded many of the institutions of the Persian empire as exemplary, and thereby earned the title of the "last of the Achaemenids" (Briant 2002: 876); this, too, explains the Achaemenid traits of later Near Eastern empires.

Political Calculation or Genuine Philhellenism? The Parthian Relationship with Greek Culture and Greek Subjects in Times of Peace and War

Roman views of the barbarian and devious, exotic, and soft, and also beautiful Parthian enemy, who, belonging to an *orbis alter* ("counter world"), is not able to behave like a Roman, stand in the literary and iconographic tradition of Greek images of

barbarians, especially Persians.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, therefore, in Augustus' time (after 20 BC) the Greek victories of 490 (Marathon) and 480–479 BC (Salamis and Plataea) were systematically "updated," and the identification of the Parthians with the Persians became a central topic of Roman imperial ideology. All this aimed at stressing the superiority of the occident over the orient as a singular achievement of occidental history (Schneider 1998: 110–11). Like Alexander, who had passed off his Persian campaign to the Greeks as a war of revenge for Xerxes' invasion of Hellas, so too the first Roman Emperor represented Roman preparations against Parthia since Caesar's time as retaliatory measures. When the Augustan poets call the Parthians Medes, Persians or Achaemenids (cf. Wissemann 1982), this is equivalent to the Parthians' Achaemenid-Persian dress in Roman pictorial art or the imitation of the naval battle of Salamis during the inaugural ceremonies of the temple of Mars Ultor in 2 BC.¹⁶

While the Greek conquerors of the Persians served the Romans of Augustan times as models which they had not only imitated but even surpassed, the Achaemenid Persians were useful to the Parthians not only as royal predecessors, but also as legitimizing "forefathers": they not only adopted Achaemenid institutions and titulature, most probably through the agency of the Seleucids, but also discovered the newly conquered Parthia as their "home country" and the Achaemenid Artaxerxes II as their royal ancestor. When, according to Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.31), the Parthian king Artabanus II in a letter to Tiberius reclaimed the public treasury bequeathed to the Romans by the Parthian prince Vonones, referred to the old Persian and Macedonian borders, and threatened to invade the areas formerly ruled by Cyrus and Alexander, this may be regarded as an exaggerated use of ideology in diplomacy. Yet it should also be seen as an attempt to confront the Roman imitation of the Greeks with their own adoration of Cyrus, who was also highly renowned in the west, and the Roman imitation of Alexander with the Parthian emulation of the Macedonian (Wiesehöfer 1986: 177–85, 1994).

The references to Alexander and his successors lead us to the question of the Parthian relationship to the culture of their numerous Greek subjects and of the Arsacid strategies of peacekeeping and reconciliation in a Greek environment.¹⁷ Surely, the Arsacids were not eager to embrace the Greek winners of Salamis and Plataea, but does this mean that they were not able or willing to relate to the Greeks of their realm, that they had only a superficial interest in their cultural achievements, and that their philhellenism was only governed by reasons of political utility? Is Augustus right when he shunts the Parthians off to the eastern barbarian counter world, where Greek education and culture is hardly even conceivable? Many Romans of Augustan times would have answered these questions positively, and even today such verdicts are still common. It is frequently assumed that the Arsacids lacked familiarity with Greek culture and that their policy was determined by a hostile attitude towards their unreliable pro-Seleucid or pro-Roman subjects. A closer look at some sources proves both assumptions wrong.

In his biography of Crassus, Plutarch introduces the Parthian king Orodes (II) as follows (33.2):

Whilst these things were doing [Surena's triumph over Crassus, 53 BC], Orodes had already struck up a peace with the Armenian Artabazes [Artavasdes], and made a match between his son Pacorus and the king of Armenia's sister. Their alternating feastings and

entertainments in consequence were very sumptuous, and various Greek compositions, suitable to the occasion, were recited before them. For Orodes was not ignorant of the Greek language and literature, and Artavasdes was so expert in it that he wrote tragedies and orations and histories, some of which are still extant (trans. John Dryden).

Plutarch then describes the famous scene, when, during a performance of Euripides's *Bacchae*, Crassus's head is brought into the throne hall and the actor Jason of Tralles connects the stories of Pentheus and the Roman general. Plutarch explicitly stresses that *both* kings liked Greek plays, which they used to stage in the course of their *mutual* invitations; and it was only the contrast between the Greek education of the Arsacid king and his barbaric treatment of Crassus's corpse that induced the biographer to describe this scene in full detail or, at least, to provide it with a special meaning: "Plutarch's Parthians are dangerously violent readers of Euripides" (Zadorojniy 1997: 182). The Arsacid kings' personal preference for Greek culture is also proven by the art of the Parthian royal residences in an Iranian, non-Greek environment: the excavators of the first Arsacid residence at Nisa in Turkmenistan detected both Greek workshops and Greek cultural imagery (Invernizzi 1998; Wiesehöfer 2000, with bibliography). Everything points to an intensive preoccupation of the Parthian kings of the second and first centuries BC with Greek art and Greek ideas for the purpose of royal self-representation.

But what about Arsacid policies towards the Greeks of Mesopotamia and Parthian methods of preserving the peace in Seleucia on the Tigris or Susa in the politically turbulent days of Roman interference with Parthian affairs? This question leads us back to real political life and the time of Augustus and his successors. Whenever in their days a pretender to the Arsacid throne looked for Roman support or was even sent from Roman Syria into Parthian territory, it became crucial, for strategic, economic, and political reasons, on which side the "Greek" cities of Mesopotamia stood. For example, the Parthian king Artabanus II (AD 10/11–38) not only abstained, in a specific situation, from using the normal epithet *philhellēn* ("Friend of the Greeks") on his coins (Sellwood 1980: 200–02), he also intervened in the autonomy of the Greek cities and took up a clear position in their internal conflicts.¹⁸ The example of Seleucia proves that this policy was clearly connected with fights about the throne and Roman interference in Parthian internal affairs by supporting pretenders to the throne. Artabanus sought the support of the *primores* (the political "elite"), a group which, because of its small size, could be influenced more easily (Tac. *Ann.* 6.42.2) and, for its part, hoped to profit from its bond of trust to the king. Not surprisingly, the *populus* (the people) supported Artabanus's opponent Tiridates who, after his initial success, provided for a "democracy" in Seleucia (ibid. 6.42.3) and probably promised to respect the city's autonomy. Seleucia's later rebellion against Artabanus and his son Vardanes was probably intended to defend this constitution and autonomy, as is proven by the winner's first measure (ibid. 11.9), the transfer of power to the *boulē*, the council dominated by the "elite."¹⁹ The kings' support for the undoubtedly Greek "aristocracy" of the city and consequent opposition to the majority of the population, and Artabanus's abstention from bearing the epithet *philhellēn*, clearly suggest that the *populus*, to a large extent, must have been made up of Greeks or at least hellenized

non-Greeks (cf. Dabrowa 1983: 84ff.; 1994: 195ff.). It is therefore unnecessary to interpret the hostilities in the city and its rebellion as an ethnic conflict and to insinuate that Artabanus acted for reasons of fundamental enmity with the Greeks. All that can be said is that this king, in a certain situation, hoped to profit from a curtailment of the autonomy of the “Greek” city,²⁰ a policy that was obviously also in the interest of the Greek “elite” of Seleucia.²¹

There can be no doubt that the Arsacids and their court were more than superficially hellenized. Surrounded by hellenized neighbors, emulating the Seleucid kings and satraps, and contacted frequently by Greek cities and individuals, they had opportunities and good reasons for being acquainted with Greek traditions. In doing so, however, they did not forget their Iranian roots. Like all rulers of the Hellenistic world, they did not firmly decide on one way or the other in cultural and political affairs. Yet the Arsacid kings of the second and first centuries BC not only showed great personal interest in the achievements of Greek civilization but were eager to emulate their predecessors and contemporaries politically and ideologically and to find acceptance in their circles. Political marriages and contacts served this goal no less than the imitation of Greek institutions and ideas, and both measures also provided for the strengthening of their rule inwards and outwards. Placing Hellenistic royal epithets, symbols, and guarding divinities on their coins, the Parthians aimed at impressing their Greek subjects and royal neighbors. It signaled that the Arsacids, like other kings, considered themselves successors of Alexander the Great and promoted Greek culture. Here, personal and public philhellenism in foreign and domestic affairs came together for their mutual benefit. Good Parthian relations with the Greeks of the empire guaranteed peace and order and facilitated an intensive experience of their cultural achievements. A disturbance of this mutually profitable relationship between rulers and Greek subjects did not necessarily cause the royal renunciation of their personal interests. To assume this would be equal to regarding philhellenism exclusively a phenomenon of royal Arsacid ideology and considering political measures against Greek cities proof of a merely superficial attachment of the Parthian kings to Greek traditions. Anybody confronted with Roman punitive measures against Greek states in the second century BC would not interpret these as proof of Roman lack of interest in Greek culture but would try to describe the reasons for such measures. Just so, Artabanus’s dealings with Seleucia (and Susa) should be explained against the background of the specific political situations, and without connecting them with the issue of the king’s personal philhellenism.

Chivalrous Jousting and Rules of Protocol: Images of War and Peace in Sasanian Iran

In that year Blases [Wahram V], king of the Persians, came, making war on the Romans. When the emperor of the Romans learnt of this, he made the patrician Procopius *magister militum per Orientem*, and sent him with an army to do battle. When he was about to engage in battle, the Persian king sent him a message, “If your whole army has a man able

to fight in single combat and to defeat a Persian put forward by me, I shall immediately make a peace-treaty for fifty years and provide the customary gifts.” When these terms had been agreed, the king of the Persians chose a Persian named Ardazanes from the division known as the Immortals, while the Romans selected a certain Goth, Areobindus, (who was) *comes foederatorum*. The two came out on horseback fully armed. Areobindus also carried a lasso according to Gothic custom. The Persian charged at him first with his lance, but Areobindus, bending down to his right, lassoed him, brought him down off his horse and slew him. Thereupon the Persian king made a peace treaty (Ioh. Mal. 14.23; trans. E. Jeffrys and R. Scott).

This episode in Malalas’ description of the battle of AD 421, which led to a stop in the fighting between Romans and Sasanians and to a peace treaty between Theodosius II and Wahram V one year later, is probably not historical. Nevertheless, it was chosen by the historian with good reason, as he seems to have been familiar with the motif of the single combat in an Iranian context. From its very beginning, the Sasanian art of rock sculptures had known jousting scenes (probably derived from Hellenistic-Parthian models) that referred symbolically to important historical decisions and turning points.²² More complex historical processes were depicted through additional jousting scenes both juxtaposed to and underneath each other. Most probably, those big-sized scenes of combat were originally designed for the mosaics and paintings of Sasanian palaces and then found their way into other genres of art. The fact that the Iranian heroic tradition also presents important historical and military decisions in the form of duels (such as jousting or wrestling matches) speaks for a common root of the literary and iconographic versions of such ordeal-like situations.

It has long been known that both Romans and Sasanians, in the context of their triumphal art, tended to use the visual imagery and ideological vocabulary of their enemies. Thus the famous triumphal reliefs of Shabühr I show the exact reversal of the visual ideology used by the Roman emperors (Schneider 2006). On the other hand, Galerius celebrated his triumph over Narseh on the triumphal arch in Thessalonica not only through the motif of a tribute procession of barbarians offering gifts to the Roman emperor but also by depicting a jousting scene involving the victorious Roman Emperor and the defeated Sasanian “King of Kings” (ibid.). Iran’s superiority over Rome is stressed both in the Sasanian royal inscriptions and Iranian mythological tradition. When Eranshahr (“Land/Empire of the Aryans”: Gnoli 1989, 1993) became the official and prescribed point of reference for all Sasanian subjects, the idea of a dangerous, hostile outer world developed accordingly. The importance of Rome for the identity of the Sasanian Iranians is particularly obvious in the *Res Gestae Divi Saporis*, Shabühr’s report on his personal deeds and his court. There, the neighbor in the west – despite the special danger he poses, which lifts him far above the other enemies and justifies a personal royal account at a memorial place such as Naqsh-e Rostam – is portrayed not as a second world power but as a tributary to Iran (Rubin 1998: 181). In §91 of his *Res Gestae* at the tower of Paikuli, Shabühr’s son Narseh explicitly stresses the fact that, at the beginning of his rule, there were peaceful and friendly relations between himself and the Roman Emperor, and that these were the result of Roman efforts to attain peace and friendship from him. This idea imitates the

style of Roman panegyric with its emphasis on Persian supplication (Rubin 1998: 181–82; Wiesehöfer in press). On the other hand, the Romans are the only foes to whom the principle of *bellum iustum* (“just war”) is applied (Rubin 1998: 182). Apart from inscriptions, the Sasanians also used other media to give expression to their striving for superiority over Rome. Particularly famous are the scenes of triumph on Sasanian rock reliefs (Schneider 2006) and the “Shabuhr-Cameo” of the Bibliothèque National in Paris which has been interpreted correctly as a Roman piece of art made upon Sasanian instructions (von Gall 1990: 56–59). However, the ways the Iranians tried to cope with Roman ideas of world domination and with the Roman language of visual art have not yet been properly analyzed.

In Sasanian royal ideology, the Romans and later the Byzantines were never dismissed from their subordinate position, even if in diplomatic contacts the Sasanians had to be content with acknowledging the equal rank of both realms and dynasties (see below). In an episode of Ibn al-Balkhi’s *Farsnama*, probably mirroring late Sasanian propaganda, the throne of the Byzantine emperor is given a preferred place among all the neighbors’ thrones, a place, however, from which he is forced to look up to Husraw I (Le Strange and Nicholson 1921: 97). There is much to suggest also that the Iranian rulers of the fifth and sixth centuries, similar to Shabuhr’s pecuniary demands on Philip the Arab, propagandistically passed off Byzantine payments as tribute, although they were part of well-balanced diplomatic agreements and intended to support Sasanian efforts to protect the borders against nomads or mountain tribes (Yarshater 1983: 410; Rubin 1998: 178–79).

Even if both Sasanian and Roman triumphal art leaves no doubt about the outcome of the respective duel portrayed (very often the enemy is unseated or taken by his hand), and even if the two great powers ideologically stressed their own superiority,²³ the peace treaty at the end of the Malalas anecdote quoted earlier suggests that, in practice, both sides had to recognize their equal rank and get along with each other for better or worse. It is no surprise, therefore, that the peace treaties of the Romans or Byzantines and Sasanians were not only regarded as historically most relevant events but also arranged in a special ceremonial way.²⁴ This becomes particularly clear in Menander Protector’s report on the peace treaty of 562 AD between Justinian and Husraw I (fr. 6.1 Blockley). The author, a man with a profound rhetorical and legal education and, as a member of the emperor Maurice’s court, familiar with Byzantine diplomatic customs, offers insight into all substantial aspects of international law at his time. He talks about the special position of the envoys, the choice of a suitable place for diplomatic negotiations, the ceremonial protocol, the linguistic problems of communication, and, last but not least, the dealings of the two rulers with each other. First, Petrus, *magister militum praesentalis*, and Jesdegusnaph, Husraw’s chamberlain, both high-ranking functionaries and experienced diplomats with imperial authorization to negotiate and decide matters, meet at a neutral place in the frontier region near Dara and convene a meeting of the commanders of the surrounding territories. The two negotiators speak in their native tongue, describing their own starting position in as favorable, just, and benevolent terms as possible; interpreters translate these inaugural speeches. Menander summarizes the following discussion by briefly defining the demands of the two parties

and the main final agreements. Documents (*sacrae litterae*) are then executed and sent to both rulers for ratification;²⁵ of the rulers' letters, Menander quotes the Persian (in Greek translation) quite literally. Afterwards, in further meetings and negotiations between the envoys of both empires all details are clarified. Finally, the official contract is issued both in Greek and Middle Persian and compared word for word. Menander concludes his report on the negotiations with the following words:

When matters had progressed to this stage of orderly development, those whose task it was took the texts of the two documents and polished their contents, using language of equivalent force. Then they made facsimiles of both. The originals were rolled up and secured by seals both of wax and of the other substance used by the Persians, and were impressed by the signets of the envoys and of twelve interpreters, six Roman and six Persian. Then the two sides exchanged the treaty documents, the Zikh [Jesdegusnaph] handing the one in Persian to Peter, and Peter the one in Greek to the Zikh. Then the Zikh was given an unsealed Persian translation of the Greek original to be kept as a reference for him, and Peter likewise was given a Greek translation of the Persian. After this the conference ended (Men. Prot. fr. 6.1; trans. R.C. Blockley).

In the preamble to the Sasanian document of ratification (in Menander's version) "the divine, good, father of peace, ancient Chosroes [Husraw], king of kings, fortunate, pious and beneficent, to whom the gods have given great fortune and a great kingdom, giant of giants, formed in the image of the gods,"²⁶ calls his Roman opponent "Justinian Caesar, our brother."²⁷ Even if the titulature given to Justinian is plainly shorter than his own, the form of address ("brother") nevertheless shows clearly that the "king who reigns over kings" and the "victor of wars" grants the "lord of all things and of the world"²⁸ equal rank in a diplomatic context. This is stressed eloquently and colorfully in the words Byzantine authors like Petrus Patricius and John Malalas put into the mouth of Sasanian kings and diplomats. There is mention of the two empires as two lights, which, "like eyes, are adorned by each other's light" (Petr. Patr. fr. 13 Müller), or as two divinely planned centers of civilization, which are called "the moon of the west" and "the sun of the east" (Ioh. Mal. 18.44, p. 449 Thurn). Rome and Byzantium equally grant the same rank, dignity, and autonomy to the eastern opponent, although, ideologically, the eastern *natio molestissima* ("most annoying nation") would actually deserve to be destroyed (Amm. Marc. 23.5.19), and although, or precisely because, Rome's claim to universal rule was in reality substantially limited by the existence of the Sasanian empire.

It was also usual for the two great powers to announce accessions to the throne by a special message and to answer this report by a special greeting.²⁹ And it was also custom and practice to ask the foreign envoys during a solemn audience about the well-being of the royal "brother" and to exchange gifts. The fulfillment of requests also served to keep good terms with the neighbors.³⁰

We are particularly well informed about one special form of communication between the Emperor and the Great King: embassies (Güterbock 1906; Sako 1986). The Byzantine sources make a difference between the so-called "great" and "small" embassies and envoys, designations which refer both to the respective importance of the legation and the rank of the envoys. Each legation had to be formally announced to

the ruler with whom it was going to be authenticated, by state couriers or an announcement to the border authorities; however, neither ruler was obliged to receive it. We also know numerous cases of legations and counter-embassies that struggled to find agreement during difficult and lengthy negotiations; and we hear about the intentional delay of negotiations to improve one's own position, as well as about suspicions of espionage (Lee 1993: 166–70). Both rulers selected particularly distinguished envoys for the more important negotiations; if they proved successful, the kings repeatedly entrusted them with missions. We know about limited and unrestricted authorization for the envoys as well as secret instructions. The envoys, among whom the highest-ranking dignitary normally acted as a spokesman, were accompanied by attendants, assistants and interpreters (cf. above). They enjoyed certain privileges both in times of peace and war: they were sacrosanct, traveled in the neighboring country at public expense, were accommodated and entertained in accordance with their rank, and were not subject to the usual customs regulations and trade restrictions. While most sources inform us only about diplomatic procedures and ceremonies at the court in Constantinople, Menander uniquely describes Byzantine negotiations with Husraw I and his successor Ohrmezd IV in detail; not surprisingly, the diplomatic failures of the Byzantines are attributed to the improper behavior (pride and slyness) of the Sasanian kings:

When Hormisdas [Ohrmezd] had made this arrogant reply, Zacharias and Theodorus were finally dismissed, having spent almost three months there and having suffered all manner of discomforts. For the guard assigned to the envoys did not allow them to breathe fresh air or even put their heads out of the building where they were lodged. Their lodging itself was dark and poorly ventilated and particularly unsuitable for the summer, so that it actually seemed like a prison. When they had been worn out by these bad conditions, the Persians dismissed them and harassed them far worse on their return trip. For they supplied them with provisions insufficient for their needs, forced them to delay and made their journey very long. They led them forward for one day's journey and on the next led them back by another path, until they had so distressed them that they both fell seriously ill. Then they sent them out of Persia (Men. Prot. fr. 23.9; trans. R. C. Blockley).

Outlook

Both the Achaemenid ideology of a divinely requested order of peace, maintained by just rulers and loyal subjects alike, and the Sasanian symbol of the duel have shaped the view of Ancient Iran for centuries. The *pax Achaemenidica* has been influential in Europe (despite the usual European preference for the Greek way of civilization and the survival of ancient stereotypes of barbarians and of myths of the Persian Wars), not least because it was viewed much more favorably than the alleged deathly quiet of the *pax Assyriaca*. In Iran, such views were based on the myth of a history of 2500 years of human rights and religious tolerance.³¹ On the other hand, the Sasanian motif of chivalrous jousting lives on in the entire Iranian-speaking Near East, because it was excessively used by Iranian poets. Tradition and research have not been fair to the Parthians. The Sasanians drove them out from tradition and the Romans relegated

them to an “outer” or even to a “counter world,” and this has been their place until now. In reality, their success in founding an empire and keeping peace in it, was rather impressive.³²

Notes

- 1 Successful attempts to describe Persian (i.e. the Great Kings’) views of the Greeks on the basis of royal inscriptions and reliefs were made by Sancisi-Weerdenburg 2001; Kuhrt 2002: 19–22, who show that, ideologically, the kings were interested only in their Greek subjects, not in the Greeks outside their realm.
- 2 Briant 2002; Wiesehöfer 2001a: 79–88; 2002a; Funke 2002 (all with bibliography).
- 3 Stausberg 2002: 159. Cf. also de Jong 1997 (who compiled and analyzed the accounts of Greco-Roman authors); Panaino 2001: 100–08.
- 4 Wiesehöfer 2002b. For the Roman imagery of “Orientals” and Parthians respectively, see Schneider 1998, for the role of the Parthians in Roman literature, Lerouge, in press.
- 5 A first attempt is made in Wiesehöfer and Huyse 2006.
- 6 Gignoux (2006); Gyselen 1999, 2002; Huyse 2002; Panaino 2001; Rubin 2002; Schneider (2006).
- 7 Huyse (in press) shows how Darius I and his successors used Avestan (Zoroastrian) and secular (oral) Iranian folk traditions (about legendary Iranian kings) to make their rule part of an Iranian “historical” continuum.
- 8 Cf. *DPd* 12–24 (quoted above); cf. 56–60: “O man, the commandment of Auramazda – let not that seem evil to you! Do not leave the right path! Do not be disobedient!” and *XPh* 1-6.46-56: “A great god (is) Auramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder heaven, who created man, who created blissful happiness for man, who made Xerxes king, the one king of many, the one master of many . . . You, whosoever (shall be) hereafter, if you shall think: ‘Blissful may I be (while) living and (when) dead may I be blessed,’ obey the law, which Auramazda has established! Worship Auramazda at the proper time and in the proper ceremonial style!” (trans. R. Schmitt).
- 9 Cf. *DBIV* 61–67: “Proclaims Darius, the king: For that reason Auramazda brought me aid and the other gods who are, because I was not disloyal, I was no follower of Falsehood, I was no evil-doer, neither I nor my family, (but) I acted according to righteousness, neither to the powerless nor to the powerful did I do wrong, (and) the man who strove for my (royal) house, him I treated well, who did harm, him I punished severely” (trans. R. Schmitt).
- 10 I have profited greatly from Hölscher 1999.
- 11 Matthiae 1999: 209–63; Roaf 2004. In comparison with Assyrian sculpture, which had come to depict flexible, complex, and overlapping plots, its Achaemenid counterpart appears to be noticeably timid, immobile, and lacking major stylistic development. On the other hand, this type of representation correlates with the indeterminacy of time and place in the royal inscriptions.
- 12 Jursa 2004; Schaudig 2001 reveal the dependence of Achaemenid royal inscriptions on Assyrian and Babylonian models.
- 13 For example, in Miletus in 494 or Eretria in 490 BC parts of the population were deported to the East, but the cities’ history did not come to an end (Ehrhardt 2003).
- 14 Cf. Wiesehöfer 1995; for the allocation of responsibilities, see Jacobs 2003 (although based on a highly disputed model of administration).
- 15 For Greek views of the Persians, see Raeck 1981; Schmal 1995; Hutzfeldt 1999. For the variety of actual contacts between Greeks and Persians, see the excellent study of Miller 1997.

- 16 *Res Gestae divi Aug.* 23; Vell. Pat. 2.100; Plin. *HN* 16.190, 210; Stat. *Silv.* 4.4.7; Tac. *Ann.* 14.15; Suet. *August.* 43.3; *Tib.* 7.3; Cass. Dio 55.10.7.
- 17 I have discussed these problems extensively elsewhere and cited many examples (Wiesehöfer 2000); here, I confine myself to three particularly disputed case studies.
- 18 The discussion centers on the famous letter of Artabanus II to the magistrates of Susa (*RC* 75) and Tacitus's report on this king's policy towards Seleucia (*Ann.* 6.42ff.). See Le Rider 1965: 408–33; Dabrowa 1983: 79ff.; 1994: 185ff. (with earlier literature).
- 19 This follows from Vardanes's coins, which show the image and the legend of the *boulē*; cf. Sellwood 1980: 211–12. According to Philostr., *Vita Apollonii* 1.32, Vardanes was Apollonius's interlocutor, that is, a monarch open to Greek culture.
- 20 On the other hand, we would misunderstand Tiridates and his political aims, if we regarded him as an unreserved Grecophile. In his efforts to gain political backing, he turned to the *populus* of Seleucia, which had been disappointed by Artabanus; however, at the same time, he wooed the favor of the Parthian aristocracy.
- 21 Because of this assessment, but also in the light of the archaeological and epigraphic testimonies, we would be mistaken in regarding the year AD 42 as the starting-point of an unstoppable “decline” or even a kind of “orientalization” of the “Greek” city of Seleucia.
- 22 See von Gall 1990: 97 for the temporary adoption of Roman imagery.
- 23 The Sasanians did not programmatically invent and systematically cultivate a similar preoccupation with the Occident as the Romans did with the Orient, although Rum appears as one of the two deadly foes of Iran in the “Iranian National History” (Wiesehöfer 2005).
- 24 For the Romano-Sasanian diplomatic encounters and peace treaties, see Güterbock 1906; Winter 1988, 1989; Winter and Dignas 2001: 141–81.
- 25 The Roman or Byzantine emperors and Sasanian kings did not meet personally. At that time, official visits and meetings of monarchs were unusual.
- 26 Justinian normally uses for himself a titlature which was still in use in the tenth century AD: “the pious, the lucky, the renowned, the victorious, the triumphant, always the illustrious emperor”: *pius* (*eusebēs*), *felix* (*eutykhēs*), *inclutus* (*endoxos*), *victor* (*nikētēs*), *triumphator* (*trophaïouchos*), *semper augustus* (*aeisebastos augoustos*).
- 27 Totally different is the protocol of Husraw II's letter, when he asks the emperor Maurice for help: “Chosroes king of the Persians greets the most prudent king of the Romans, the beneficent, peaceful, masterful, lover of nobility and hater of tyranny, equitable, righteous, savior of the injured, bountiful, forgiving” (Th. Sim. 4.11, trans. M. and M. Whitby).
- 28 These are the words in Amm. Marc. 19.2.12 (*rex regibus imperans et bellorum victor – dominus rerum et mundi*). Cf. 17.5.3: “I, Sapor, king of kings, partner of the stars, brother of the sun and the moon, send my best regards to the Caesar Constantius, my brother” (*Rex regum Sapor, particeps siderum, frater Solis et Lunae, Constantio Caesari fratri meo salutem plurimam dico*), a formula which Constantius answers in the following way: “I, Constantius, the victor on land and on the sea, always the illustrious Emperor, send my best regards to king Sapor, my brother” (*Victor terra marique Constantius semper Augustus fratri meo Saponi regi salutem plurimam dico*).
- 29 Ioh. Mal. 18.34, 36 (pp. 445, 448) Thurn; Men. Prot. fr. 9.1 Blockley; Th. Sim. 3.12; Theophan. Chron. 250 de Boor; Chr. Pasch. 735 Dindorf. Such an announcement is omitted by Ohrmezd IV (Th. Sim. 3.17), whereas Husraw II does not accept the letter of the murderer of his patron Maurice, Phocas (id. 8.15).
- 30 Inquiry: Petr. Patr. *apud* Constantin. Porphyrogen. *De caeremoniis* 1.89 Bonn; gifts: *ibid.* 1.89, 90; Procop. *Pers.* 1.24 et al.; gifts of the Augusta to the Persian queen: Ioh. Mal. 18.61 (p. 467) Thurn. Requests: for example, Justinian granted Husraw I his wish and allowed the neo-Platonic philosophers, who had come to the Sasanian court at Ctesiphon,

- to return (Hartmann 2002); he also sent the physician Tribunus, whom Husraw had asked for, to Persia for one year to cure the Sasanian king (Procop. *Goth.* 4.10).
- 31 Wiesehöfer 1999. That this idea is still common in Iran, even under intellectuals, is shown by the Nobel Lecture of the admirable Shirin Ebadi (www.nobel.se/peace/laureates/2003/ebadi-lecture-e.html): "I am an Iranian. A descendent of Cyrus the Great. The very emperor who proclaimed at the pinnacle of power 2500 years ago that ... 'he would not reign over the people if they did not wish it.' And [he] promised not to force any person to change his religion and faith and guaranteed freedom for all. The Charter of Cyrus The Great is one of the most important documents that should be studied in the history of human rights."
 - 32 I would like to thank Kurt Raaflaub for inviting me to contribute to this publication and for improving the English version of my text.

Abbreviations

CII	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum</i> . London
DB	Inscription of Darius I from Bisutun
DPd	Inscription d of Darius I from Persepolis
MMAI	Mémoires de la Mission Archéologique Française en Iran
OrOcc	Oriens et Occidens. Stuttgart
RC	Welles 1934
SOR	Serie Orientale Roma dell'Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo
XPh	Inscription h of Xerxes I from Persepolis

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